

...offering
information &
inspiration
to individuals with
disabilities and
their families
as they direct their
own supports and
services



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Friendship: Enriching Self-Directed Living

Friendships are important for everyone. Research has shown that people who feel part of their local community and have friends are healthier and happier. This is the case for all people, including those with a disability.

Friends are important because they support each other emotionally, are willing to see things from the other's point of view, and provide assistance and feedback. Friends choose each other and remain close through good times and times of crisis. They provide companionship and help each other enjoy new experiences and appreciate life more fully. Friendships between people with and without disabilities usually enrich the lives of both.

*Friendship
improves
happiness and
abates misery,
by doubling our
joy and dividing
our sorrow.*

- Joseph Addison

Yet many people with disabilities are missing out on the benefits of good friends because making and keeping friends can be challenging. Due to physical segregation, people with disabilities often have limited opportunities to take part in activities where they can meet peers. Services may restrict people's chances to get together, through program or funder rules, curfews, transportation restrictions, and other limitations. Whatever the reason, people with disabilities frequently become cut off and isolated from others.

Often, support for friendships is needed. Relationships between people with and without disabilities are not formed by simply grouping people together. Some individuals need assistance with fitting into certain settings and activities. Others may need someone to facilitate their involvement or to interpret for them. Without supports, some people may never have the opportunity to get to know each other.

While most people enjoy meeting new people, they are sustained by those they have known over time. The continuity of relationships over the years is an important source of security, comfort and self-worth. Many people with disabilities do not have continuous relationships. Instead, they may leave

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"I get by with a little help from my friends..."

The Friendship Group: Improving quality of life through meaningful friendships

As they play cards, Robbie and Dana talk. Robbie, a generation older, listens, as Dana, a shy young woman, talks about the trouble she is having with her mom. Robbie gently suggests that Dana learn to help her mom around the house. Dana smiles and nods, "Thanks."

This simple exchange between friends was one of many at a recent meeting of The Friendship Group - a unique program created to help individuals with disabilities become part of a community of caring friends. Members participate in activities, games and social events designed to develop talents and social gifts that can be shared.

The idea behind The Friendship Group came when Elliot Storch, a licensed clinical social worker and former behaviorist, noticed that many people with disabilities, particularly those who live at home with family, lack a circle of good friends to whom they can turn. "Over the years, social workers would ask me to intervene during periods of family crisis. I came to see how a lack of friends in the lives of adults with disabilities was preventing good planning and effective natural supports from developing," said Storch.

Storch sees The Friendship Group as fitting well into self-directed services such as Self-Determination and Real Life Choices. He has found that although participants in the group live in the community, they lack a *sense* of community. They have jobs, but lack friends at work who care. Storch says his goal is not only to create a community in which members share their lives and goals, but to create a place in which there is an opportunity to develop special one-to-one friendships.

What began as a more traditional social skills group in 1994 has evolved into eight different Friendship Groups in four counties. Storch emphasizes that The Friendship Group is not a curriculum-driven, social skills group, nor is it group therapy. It is a place to make and keep friends. "I ask the members of the group to see me as a coach," explains Storch. "It is

their group, and they are there for one another." Storch plans activities that friends do when they get together - watch a movie, play a game, eat a meal or just chat. But it is much more than activities and games: "When the group gets together, something extraordinary happens, says Storch.

One of the unique features of The Friendship Group is an individualized hand book custom made for each member. Using digital photos and few words, Storch records activities and events that are significant to each member, and puts them together to make a personalized handbook. The book travels with members back and forth, allowing participants to talk with others outside the group about their experiences and friendship, and allowing individual members to connect outside of the group meetings.

With the right tools, I believe people can build better lives."

**- Elliot Storch
founder of
The Friendship
Group**

For long-time group member Steve, the book proved transformative. Storch recalled how, for years, Steve would talk only about himself in the group, and found it hard to empathize with others. While sharing a special birthday book made for him by his friends at The Friendship Group, Steve and his dad, Vince, began to talk about Vince's experiences - and those of Steve's grandfather - as leaders in the military during World War I and World War II. Steve decided that he wanted to be a leader too. Seeing the connection of his past to his present, Steve told the group, "I want to learn to do what a leader does - I want to worry about my troops and take care of them."

Storch never imagined the direction The Friendship Group would take. "I have found that once people develop the interest and talents needed to become good friends, they really blossom. They are thrilled to help *each other* now."

"I don't teach 'social skills,' says Storch. "These are people who have developed social *gifts*! I help them share those gifts with each other."

There are currently 8 Friendship Groups operating in Warren, Hudson, Passaic and Morris Counties. Participation can be funded through an individual budget, family support funds or private resources. For more information on The Friendship Group, or to set up a Friendship Group in your area, contact Elliot Storch at 973-243-9111.

Friendship

continued from the cover

their families, be moved from one program to another and have to adjust to staff people and roommates who come and go.

There are different ways that personal relationships between people with and without disabilities may be encouraged. Perhaps more important than the specific method is the supportive, connecting role that family members, staff members, friends and neighbors can devote to this purpose.

People can establish friendships with each other, but it is not possible to force friendships upon others. It is possible to create opportunities for people with and without disabilities to meet and share time with each other in ways that encourage friendships to take root and flourish. Families and service providers can help to make such opportunities available.

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Making Community Connections

What Parents & Service Providers Can Do to Facilitate Friendships

Work for full inclusion into the community. In addition to being physically present, people with disabilities need adequate supports to fully participate at work and in the neighborhood. Work to ensure that the person with a disability takes part in a variety of integrated recreation and leisure activities. A consistent physical presence in each others' lives helps lead to friendships between people with and without disabilities.

Ensure social participation. How people with disabilities are supported within integrated settings is important. People without disabilities need the opportunity to meet their counterparts with disabilities as peers, not as objects of tutoring or volunteer service.

Involve and trust others. While there may be differences in how independent people can become, parents and service providers must come to believe that there are people in the community who would, if given the opportunity, enjoy and welcome a friendship.

Reduce barriers to friendship. The way in which support services are provided to people with disabilities and their families can enhance or reduce the opportunities for friendships to develop. Segregated programs dramatically lessen the chances for contact between people with and without disabilities.

Create Supports. Even in integrated settings, people with disabilities may not be able to take part in extracurricular activities (e.g., choir, clubs, sports) because of lack of transportation or other supports.

Make Linkages. Encourage people who seem to like one another to pursue friendships. Service providers can review practices, such as curfews, lack of privacy and so on, which limit opportunities for people to meet and form friendships with each other.

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The United Nations' View on Services: "Nothing About Us Without Us"

The annual observance of the International Day of Disabled Persons was first proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1992. The observance of the Day, which takes place every 3 December, aims to promote an understanding of disability issues among the general population and mobilize respect for the dignity, rights and well-being of persons with disabilities.

The theme for 2004 is "Nothing About Us Without Us," focusing on the need for the active participation of people with disabilities in planning the policies and programs that affect their lives.

Consultation with people with disabilities and representatives of their organizations helps to ensure that public services (education, training, employment, transport, housing, legal and social services) are appropriate. Such consultation demonstrates respect for the rights and contributions of people with disabilities, who are often marginalized and excluded from full participation as equal citizens in society.

"Nothing About Us Without Us" has become the U.N.'s theme this year for good reason: world-wide, disability issues continue to be forgotten as men and women with disabilities are often not considered in major international efforts to combat poverty, unemployment, health care access and social exclusion.

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